

PART I

THE SIX KEYS TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

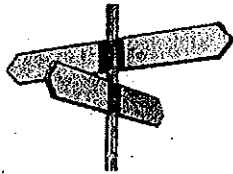
“Our community engagement efforts have increased parent participation by about 25 percent...and helped increase student attendance by about 30 percent. Our message to parents is that school is fun and we care about children and their families. Community engagement has helped us meet our adequate yearly progress goals.”

JOSEPH KIRKLAND, PRINCIPAL
JENKINS COUNTY MIDDLE SCHOOL
MILLEN, GA

The Six Keys to Community Engagement are designed to help school leaders begin such efforts with their eyes open and to take steps that will sustain their success. These lessons were distilled from conversations with principals about the problems, benefits, and strategies they encountered in engaging key stakeholders (as discussed in Part II). Each key emphasizes clear and effective communication for establishing common ground; coordinated efforts for identifying and using resources effectively to meet goals; and shared accountability for improving outcomes and sustaining improvements. Successful implementation begins and ends with passionate commitment; taken together, these Six Keys show how strategic, steady efforts ensure that school leaders end up where they want to be.

KEY 1: KNOW WHERE YOU'RE GOING

1 Know Where You're Going



"If you don't know where you're going, you will probably end up somewhere else."

LAURENCE PETER

The first and most crosscutting key to community engagement, according to almost all principals interviewed, is a clearly defined idea of the kind of school one wishes to create and a detailed plan for getting there. School leaders use a well-defined and agreed upon vision statement to provide guidance and to build public support. The vision's broad outline becomes a template against which to consider staff, curriculum, and instructional changes and to assess school progress. A clearly stated vision also helps school leaders justify and explain decisions that may be unpopular with one or more stakeholder groups. When bolstered by stories and data, the vision becomes a school leader's single most important means for engaging public support and defending continued reform efforts.

The vision should be a product of collaboration, reflecting the needs and desires of families, staff, and the community. Often principals begin development of their school's vision by tapping into the energy of existing committees or teams. Group conversations that are already focused on specific issues—student achievement or fundraising, for example—can quickly get the visioning process off the ground. Established groups are often well versed in critical school and community issues and they frequently have strong perspectives. It is essential—and helpful—to listen to all of these viewpoints when first developing the school's larger statement of purpose and direction.

Building a School Vision with the Community

When Conrado Garcia became principal at Foy H. Moody High School in Corpus Christi, Texas, he wanted to build a vision that reflected the voices of the whole community and clearly articulated the community's role in school success. Instead of making assumptions, he asked everyone the same question—teachers, students, families, central office staff, school board members, and local shopkeepers: "If you could change just one thing in this school, what would it be?" The answer came back loud and clear—expect more from students and give them more opportunities to achieve excellence.

With support and involvement from teacher leaders and community members, Moody planners developed a comprehensive set of initiatives. They emphasized the following characteristics: greater opportunities, expectations, and supports for students; alternative schedules that allow students to take more credits; improved guidance programming; more emphasis on honors courses; and greater community input.

A committee composed of university professors, doctors and hospital representatives, health-care staff, students, family members, and others designed a rigorous health sciences program and created mechanisms to ensure that students could meet the challenge. Today, the health sciences magnet program enrolls some 280 students and has graduated its first class. Sixty percent of its students come from the neighborhood. The remainder come from all over the city, attracted by the unique opportunities Moody provides. Ninety-seven percent of students in the first graduating class are college bound.

KEY 2: SHARE LEADERSHIP

2 Share Leadership



"Individual commitment to a group effort—that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work."

VINCE LOMBARDI

Responsive schools grow out of vigorous leadership that is both broadly distributed and strategically focused. As demands on the individual principal's time, energy, and resources mount, schools and districts are moving toward shared leadership approaches. Principals themselves increasingly interact with their communities, seeking out the resources, energy, and support that collaboration with others can provide. In growing numbers, these leaders work hand-in-glove with community partners, families, staff, and others to develop a shared vision for transforming traditional schools into genuine community schools.

These principals learned to share decision making across boundaries—without losing control or diminishing their leadership. They also value distributing leadership internally, which allows multiple members of the school community, including family members and staff, to share leadership functions. Shared leadership builds staff commitment to school improvement efforts and contributes to staff satisfaction.

The Importance of Coordination

Janette Hewitt, the Principal of Washington Elementary School in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, stresses the importance of sharing leadership with a community school coordinator and with community partners. "There is so much on the teacher's plate already with testing that we need support from the community and someone to coordinate this support," says Hewitt. Fortunately, she has a community school coordinator—sometimes called a resource coordinator or liaison. This person is often hired to help the principal find partners in the community, to sustain the relationship once a partner has committed to the school, and to manage the work of multiple partners thus ensuring that services are not duplicated and that staff know which supports and resources the partner is sharing with the school.

"The match with your coordinator is extremely important. Hiring my coordinator was the most important part of this work." Hewitt feels strongly that, if at all possible, the principal should be the person who interviews and hires the coordinator. She advises that principals look for characteristics such as flexibility, excellent interpersonal skills, very high energy, and a strong motivation to help students and families succeed. Once the right person is hired, she believes it is important for the new coordinator to facilitate open communication with the rest of the staff and with the principal. To do this, Hewitt suggests putting the coordinator in an office near the principal and the guidance counselor. "Some of the most productive work that gets done is through informal conversations between the coordinator and staff members who work in close proximity to the coordinator's office."

KEY 3: REACH OUT

3 Reach Out



"Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open."

J.K. ROWLING

Knowing the community surrounding your school—and encouraging your staff to learn about and engage with the community—is an essential component of a truly authentic community engagement strategy. The Rules of Engagement, outlined in *Education and Community Building, Connecting Two Worlds*,⁶ encourages school staff to find out “where your students and families live, work, and play after school.” It recommends that educators ask some of the following questions: *What banks, hospitals, community organizations, civic groups, and businesses provide services or jobs? What local issues are people talking about on call-in shows and in the news? What assets are available that might help the school? What school resources might be useful to other community groups?*

Many of our principals survey families, students, staff, and sometimes community members about specific issues or needs. Some convene focus groups or even day-long conferences to engage various stakeholders. In preparing for these efforts, schools increasingly use demographic data and review factors like immunization rates, poverty, homelessness, and many others to help communities set realistic goals and to direct appropriate resources for meeting them. School leaders gather useful data from census reports, United Way publications, local agencies, and school sources. In addition to starting conversations, data are used to establish baselines for tracking progress over time. In some schools, the curriculum itself is a pathway toward a shared community school vision.

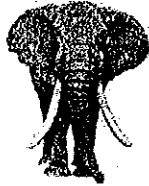
Using Asset Mapping to Learn About the Community

According to Ira Weston, the principal of Paul Robeson High School in Brooklyn, New York, asset mapping is an important means for discovering untapped community resources and for keeping abreast of community changes and needs—as seen through the eyes of the young people who live there. Every year, Robeson’s freshmen map their own community as part of the social studies curriculum. With guidance from their teacher and the principal, students divide a map of the community into a grid. Student pairs are assigned a particular area on the grid and then walk through the area, taking detailed notes and looking for specific youth-related opportunities and services. Collected data are compiled on a master map, which is then reduced to wallet size and distributed to students, teachers, and families.

This exercise produces a valuable resource for families seeking services and helps everyone involved with the school learn about the surrounding community and identify gaps in supports and services. Weston uses this information to sharpen and focus the school vision and his partners’ continuing efforts to implement it. “Our school has always been a school in and of the community. This type of activity helps students and others see that their community does have value. And it also helps these young people understand some of the ways they might improve their community. I want my young people to know that they’re important and to know that they can make a difference.”

KEY 4: DON'T IGNORE THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

4 Elephant In Room



"We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their color."

MAYA ANGELOU

Growing diversity is a defining fact of American education. No longer a primarily urban concern, suburban and rural schools must also find ways to unite students, families, and staff—any of whom may speak a different language and have different cultural beliefs, style of living, and income as well as skin color—into cohesive learning communities. Our principals define such diversity as a strength—and a challenge.

Principals urged open and honest discussions of these issues—instead of pretending they don't exist. An important function of such conversation is to help both school staff and families distinguish between cultural assumptions and cultural facts—paying closer attention to economic factors that may affect behavior. Helping staff better understand the

economic, political, and social realities in which families live improves their ability to communicate with the community and helps them to motivate young people in their own learning.

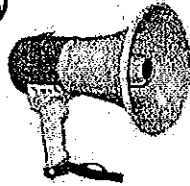
Understanding Cultural Differences

At Saratoga Elementary in Lincoln, Nebraska, about ten percent of students are American Indian. "Many American Indian children were coming late to school," says Principal Dave Knudsen, "and some teachers interpreted this to mean that their families didn't value education. But, when we began talking to families about this problem, we learned that many believed that the spirit is not yet attached fully to the body when children are young and if children are forced to do things they don't want to do, their spirits might never fully bond with their bodies. So, adults try not to impose their own will on their children. Sometimes this means that their children do not get up and out to school on time. But it doesn't mean that their families don't care or aren't involved in their lives"

It was important for Knudsen's teachers to learn about this belief. "Once we understood what was going on, we were able to find ways to work within this belief system. For one thing, we tried to make sure that learning was more hands-on and theme based. Students became more enthusiastic about learning. We found that it really makes them want to come to school. It also values the idea of more holistic learning—an approach that is highly respected in this American Indian community. We also gave these parents activities to do with their children at home, so that learning was going on at home and the students weren't falling further behind even if they were not in class."

KEY 5: TELL YOUR SCHOOL'S STORY

5 Tell Your School's Story



Try...communicating, with fullness and accuracy, some experience to another...and you will find your own attitude toward your experience changing."

JOHN DEWEY

The Public Education Network (PEN) sets out a compelling theory of action in *Taking Responsibility: Using Public Engagement to Reform Our Schools*. It argues that public engagement, coupled with specific school reform goals, results in sustained policy, practice, and public responsibility for public education. Our principals highlighted their experiences in a way that translates this theory into practice. "Many people get hung up on educational rhetoric," says Joseph Kirkland. "But we can't lose sight of the fact that we're dealing with real people. Care and compassion have to be number one. We have to learn to communicate and to tell our story well. Once parents and the community pick up on this, they will do a lot."

Principals capture attention by sharing honest stories about teaching and learning and by using relevant facts and figures strategically—to move their audiences toward action. They look for allies and develop teams who can speak to many different constituencies—existing faith and civic groups, collaborative efforts focused on youth and education issues, teachers unions, public education funds, and intermediary groups, among many others. They call on partners to identify and share statistical information that makes their case, and they use that data to establish baselines and to inform policy.

Holding Community Conversations

Madeline Latham, the principal of Lanai Road Elementary School in Encino, California, has learned how to build public and financial support effectively for her school. She says the key is having conversations with the community. Latham talks with everyone about her school and her students. She tailors her message for the audience to whom she is speaking, but the theme is always the same: Student success is a shared responsibility, and we all play a role. When speaking to the business community, Latham goes "straight to the money." She uses real estate data to argue, "A good school increases property values and leads to more money spent at local businesses." She also points to the fact that, as test scores have risen, community families have returned to the school. "I also tell them," Latham emphasizes, "their financial support and physical presence tells children that they're important, which builds pride, success, and shared values in these future adults." These conversations have helped families and community members understand that "Lanai is a good place for their financial contributions. They know that additional support is necessary if they want a 'premier school' for their children."

In making her case to families, Latham points out that, since 1999, the school's academic performance index has risen nearly 350 points, with Hispanic students' scores increasing 100 points in the first year. "This was a clincher for parents." More community families are attending Lanai rather than going elsewhere, and fewer students are being bused into the neighborhood.

KEY 6: STAY ON COURSE

6 Stay On Course



*"Keep your eyes on the stars,
and your feet on the ground."*

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Well-aligned partnerships are based on a coherent, intentional strategy for providing all the conditions necessary for learning. Services, supports, and opportunities are selected because they create specific components of a school vision—clearly and without duplication. This careful attention to alignment also calls for continual assessment and data-based decision making.

Alignment is only one half of the school improvement challenge—sustainability is the other. Of particular importance is regular assessment of all aspects of the school's community engagement strategy, including how partners are helping the school achieve its vision. Principals should ensure that activities and resources provided by partners will remain in the school over

the long haul. They should ask themselves whether these activities will endure, even after they are no longer the principal of the school.

Staying Focused on the School's Mission

"We need to stay focused and not dilute the program," says Denise Greene-Wilkinson, principal of Polaris K-12 School in Anchorage, Alaska. "It is important that activities are not catch-as-catch-can. People have great ideas," says Greene-Wilkinson. "My job is to make sure they fit within our school's vision and framework. For every proposal we need to ask: How does this fit in with what we are trying to do? Will it help or get in the way of what we need to do? If you are nebulous, you'll just end up floating nowhere."

At Polaris, an administrative team and the "principal's desk" serve as clearing-houses for all ideas proposed by potential partners. An elected advisory board—made up of six family members, four teachers, and twelve students—also makes sure that the school is holding to its mission and forming long-term partnerships that will support the school's vision. Its community partnerships provide mentors for students and create opportunities for them to shadow scientists, researchers, and doctors.

